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After-school program attempts to help kids make healthy lifestyle changes

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Blair Luscombe held Anthony Carter in the pool at the YWCA as he kicked and splashed in the process of learning how to swim.

"Use your arms and kick your legs," she said later as the 6-year-old swam to her on his own, still clad in his life jacket.

Anthony is part of the YWCA's new ECHO After-School Program, which started this fall and is open to children in kindergarten through eighth grade. ECHO, which stands for education, confidence, health and outreach, features a health and wellness education component where students learn about various topics including dental health, appropriate weight, physical health and exercise.

The program also incorporates exercise such as swimming and will later feature dance instruction, tae kwon do instruction, and the ECHO students might also become involved with the existing YWCA youth basketball program, said Jamie Kunkel, YWCA youth director.

Kunkel said the health and wellness aspect of the program is important to help children become well-rounded individuals.

The exercise also will help them with their homework.

For instance, Kunkel said if the children can exert energy in sports and exercise it will help them focus on their homework and calm them down.

She also hopes the health and wellness education they receive now will help them make healthier choices in the future.

"I think right now with fast food, it seems so convenient for kids to grab a bite to eat and they don't know how these foods affect their bodies," she said.

Shannon White, executive director of the YWCA, said it's important to provide healthy snacks to children and to teach them how to prepare healthy snacks and how good nutrition and exercise go hand in hand.

She also said the program tries to make exercise fun.

"We infuse the exercise portion with fun activities and games that they want to do to teach the children that exercise does not have to be boring or tedious," she said.

The idea was the brainchild of both White and Kunkel who both wanted a program that would serve the youth in the area. Kunkel felt the facility would be a great accommodation for incorporating health and wellness education because it has a gym, a pool and a health promotions department, which offers physical fitness resources.

Although the program is open to any child regardless of income, it serves children from low-income families as part of the YWCA's mission.

"We felt it was important to meet the needs of minority and low-income families for after school care," White said.

Additionally, the YWCA is a safe haven site identified by the five-year \$1 million Weed and Seed grant, which was awarded to Lafayette by the U.S. Department of Justice in 2007. As a safe haven site, the YWCA receives a portion of funding from the grant that goes toward the ECHO program.

The YWCA also works with FAST or Families and Schools Together, another Weed and Seed funded program, to help identify families in need of an after-school program.

"What the Y is really doing is teaching lifestyle," said Adam Murphy, Weed and Seed site coordinator. "These kids will not only learn how to eat right and exercise but it's going to teach them how to manage their lives in the future."